

A Ready-Made Reading Class: "Warming-up for Reading"

By Wilfredo Sequero

Teaching reading is not an easy task due to the complex nature of the reading process. In teaching reading for students at Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB), I have realized that while constantly searching for a better understanding of the phenomenon of reading, it is possible to create better materials to enhance the effectiveness of the reading lessons. This article shows an example of one of the most useful activities I have devised for my students at the USB. The name of this activity is "Warming- up for Reading" (WFR). This article begins with a description of the WFR worksheet, then describes a typical class using WFR, referring to the specific roles of teachers and students. The last section of the article explains how using WFR tackles skills, strategies, and other relevant aspects that, according to the literature, are supposed to be central to reading. WFR is an alternative in terms of reading materials, and a framework for teachers to design new reading materials.

The "Warming-up for Reading" Form in Detail

WFR is an activity which is completely contained in a single worksheet (See Figure 1 below). It can be used extensively with any text, audience, and level. The worksheet style, with lines to be filled out and boxes for check marks, seems to motivate students because it invites them to fill it out and gives the task an easy look. It includes clear instructions which are intended to make the activity self-contained, that is to say, an activity that can be used with little or no help from the teacher.

The worksheet also provides space for students to write their names (one or two names; to work individually or in pairs), the date and number of the class. This may be useful for evaluation purposes and for the teacher to keep track of the activities already done. The title of the text, normally given by the teacher at the beginning of the activity, is written by the students in a blank space. It is important to point out that leaving free space to write the title makes the worksheet flexible enough to be used with any text.

A Class with "Warming-up for Reading"

During the WFR activity I normally explain the instructions to my students, although they are written clearly on the form. It is always good to introduce the activity so that students feel that you, the teacher, will accompany them through the experience.

In part 1, the teacher provides students with the title of the text. Based on the title, and before reading, students are asked to write questions in English which they think they will find the

answers to in the text. At this stage it is important to tell the students that what they are doing is just predicting, and that their predictions do not necessarily have to be true later when they read the text. In a separate column, beside the questions, students will also write words that they predict will appear in the text according to the topic suggested by the title. It is advisable for the teacher to select titles that contain relevant information about the text. The teacher should also select text titles that are explicit and which do not contain ironical or sarcastic elements. In case the selected text does not have an appropriate title, the teacher should adapt the title, in order to make it appropriate for the activity. The real title should be given to the students at the end of the activity.

Ask the students to write their questions (predictions) in English. It is very important to give students extra practice in the formulation of information (Wh-) questions in English, especially in the reading class where students have less opportunity to practice other skills.

After they finish part 1, the next step for students is to read the text. They read carefully, trying to check if the questions previously formulated are answered in the text. They also check if the vocabulary they predicted appears in the text. The students should indicate on the WFR form if their predictions were correct.

Students often see the task as a challenge, and that increases their motivation. Motivating tasks are said to give a purpose to read (Harmer 1983). Tobias (1994) suggests that motivation and interests seem to go hand in hand, leading readers to engage in deeper cognitive processing. It is important to point out that WFR makes reading purposeful. Students focus their attention on the necessary information.

To round up this activity, in part II of the WFR worksheet, students have the chance to write the main idea of the text. This section of the activity is very important because during the initial tasks students concentrate on specific information, probably neglecting the general content of the text.

Finally, the teacher may discuss the results with the students, checking how many of their predictions were correct. The teacher may also promote a follow-up discussion about the topic of the text.

It is important to mention that success in using WFR will depend on the attitude that teachers and students assume during its administration. The next section deals with that specific aspect.

The Role of Teachers and Students

During the WFR activity the teacher becomes a facilitator. The teacher monitors students, helping them to clear up doubts. Dole, Duffy, Roehler, and Pearson (1991) state that the reading teacher is seen as a mediator between the text and the reader, and that should be the teacher's attitude during the WFR activity.

It is important to mention that one of the teacher's tasks during the post-reading phase is to inform students about that fact that predictions do not necessarily have to be correct. The teacher needs to make students understand that predicting implies hypothesizing and this in turn implies confirming or rejecting their hypotheses. This will help students not to feel discouraged in case most of their predictions were incorrect.

The role of each student is to participate actively, reading the text, writing the questions, and predicting. The activity is designed to be student-centered. The students take the responsibility for their own learning processes. "The most valuable information is in our students' perceptions and not our own" (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983:88). Sometimes the reading teacher devotes much time to talk about the reading and the students just listen, but learning to read by reading and working seems to be the most appropriate alternative for the student (Grabe 1991).

"WFR Theoretical Framework"

So far, the article discussed the way WFR can be administered and how flexible it can be. Now we will deal with another important aspect of WFR, its theoretical basis. WFR has been created with the purpose of having students practice abilities that are considered to be important in developing reading comprehension.

Grabe (1991:379) states six general component skills and knowledge areas of reading as part of the continuous attempts made by researchers to describe the process of reading.

1. Automatic recognition skills
2. Vocabulary and structural knowledge
3. Formal discourse structure knowledge
4. Content/world background knowledge
5. Synthesis and evaluation skills/ strategies
6. Metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring

From these six components WFR is intended to have students develop at least four. The development of vocabulary knowledge, which many authors claim is a crucial aspect of reading (Anderson and Freebody 1979; Davis 1968; Koda 1989; Rumelhard 1977), is one of the aims of WFR. Another aspect that the activity tackles is the use of headings or text titles to encourage students' metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring. When they anticipate the information to come, this is addressed by Grabe (1991) as synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies. WFR also works on the students' metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring. When the students skim the text to get a general impression of it, scan the text looking for specific information, summarize information, or preview headings, we are at the same time raising students' awareness about the importance of the use of these techniques. Students tend to incorporate these techniques into their repertoire later on.

WFR also takes advantage of the students' background knowledge to understand a given text. Many authors have pointed out background knowledge as an essential component of the reading process. Much research has been done in this area and some authors have specifically

emphasized the value that this component of reading has in the class (Grabe 1991; Carrell and Eisterhold 1988; James 1987). Pre-reading activities are said to be very useful in the reading class because they have been referred to as instruments teachers can use in the class to activate students' background knowledge. Part I of the WFR worksheet is basically questioning used in a pre-reading fashion (See Figure 1 below) which has been widely used in reading research, (Royer et al. 1984; Johnson Taglieber, and Yarbrough 1988; Wilhite 1983; Rickards and Denner 1978).

Mikulecky (1985) also lists some strategies that readers are supposed to manage. Among the strategies Mikulecky refers to, we can mention previewing, predicting, questioning (asking questions as if having a "conversation" with the writer), scanning, stating main ideas, and skimming, as strategies which are somehow covered by WFR.

Conclusion

This article presents the "Warming-up for Reading" activity which may be useful to many reading teachers who are looking for practical solutions. Besides providing a reading activity, this article shows what makes WFR a theoretically sound reading activity. I hope this article encourages reading teachers to optimize the design of their own reading materials following these ideas.


Wilfredo Sequero is currently teaching reading courses at the Universidad Simón Bolívar in Caracas.

References

- Anderson, ?. and ? Freebody. 1979. Vocabulary knowledge and reading (Reading Education Rep. No. 11). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, Center for the Study of Reading. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service no. ED. pp. 177-470).
- Carrell, P. and J. Eisterhold. 1983. Schema theory and ESL reading pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17, pp. 553-573.
- Davis, ?. 1968. Research in comprehension in reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 3.
- Dale, Duffy, Roehler and Pearson. 1991. Moving from the old to the new: Research on reading comprehension instruction. *Review of Educational Research*, 61, 2, pp. 239-264.
- Grabe, W. 1991. Current developments in second language reading research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25, 3, pp. 375-406.
- Harmer, J. 1983. The practice of English language teaching. London: Longman.
- James, M. 1987. ESL reading pedagogy: Implications of schema-theoretical research. In *Research in Reading as a Second Language*. eds. J. Devine, P. Carrel and D. Eskey. Washington, D.C.: TESOL, pp. 175-573.

- Johnson, L., L. Taglieber, and D. Yarbrough. 1988. Effects of prereading activities on EFL reading by Brazilian college students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 22, pp. 455-469.
- Koda, ?. 1989. The effects of transferred vocabulary knowledge on the development of L2 reading proficiency. *Foreign Language Annals*, 22, pp. 529-540.
- Mikulecky, B. 1985. Reading skills instruction in ESL. In *On Tesol '84*, pp. 261- 277. eds. Larson, L., E.L. Judd and D. Messerschmitt. Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Rickards, J., and P. Denner. 1978. Inserted questions as aids to reading text. *Instructional Science*, 7, pp. 313-346.
- Royer, J., J. Bates and C. Konold. 1984. Learning from text: Methods of effecting reader intent. In *Reading in a Foreign Language*. eds. J. Alderson and A. Urquhart. London: Longman, pp. 65-81.
- Rumelhart, D. 1977. Toward an interactive model of reading. In *Attention and Performance IV*. ed. S. Dornic. New York: Academic Press, pp. 573-603.
- Tobais, ?. 1994. Interest, prior knowledge, and learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 64, 1, pp. 37-54.
- Wilhite, S. 1983. Pre-passage questions: The influence of structural importance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75, pp. 234-244.

Figure 1



UNIVERSIDAD SIMÓN BOLÍVAR
DEPARTAMENTO DE IDIOMAS

Name: _____
Date: _____
Section: _____

Warming-up for Reading

Text title: _____

Part I:

Instructions: Following the title of the text, try to ask at least five (5) questions that a text with this title should answer. Also, write in the vocabulary list possible words that you could find in that text. After that, read the text and check which of your "predictions" are true. Use a check mark like this: v

Pre-questions		Vocabulary List	
1. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____?			
2. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____?			
3. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____?			
4. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____?			
5. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____?		_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
		_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
		_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
		_____	<input type="checkbox"/>

Part II: Write the main idea of the text:
